

UPI ARCHIVES JAN. 23, 1988

Exclusive Graphic Soviet lasers said to zap U.S. spy satellites

By RICHARD SALE



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WASHINGTON -- U.S. intelligence agencies are convinced Soviet laser attacks have damaged super-sophisticated American spy satellites deployed to monitor missile and spacecraft launches at the major Soviet space center, administration sources said.

These sources said they believe the Soviets fired ground-based lasers to cripple optical equipment attempting to scan launches at Tyuratam to obtain a variety of sensitive military information.

Administration intelligence sources told United Press International they fear that other vital U.S. reconnaissance satellites will soon be endangered because six new Soviet laser battle stations are under construction in the remote Caucasus Mountains.

The suspected Soviet laser 'hosings' of costly satellites, details of which remain classified, occurred over the last several years and have left U.S. scientists scrambling to shield the space surveillance system, the sources told UPI.

'There is no way you can protect the optical sensors on satellites' from laser attacks, an Air Force official said.

Intelligence sources said the United States, responding to the Soviet attacks in what appear to be the first skirmishes of the 'Star Wars' era, has electronically jammed Soviet satellite transmissions of surveillance data from U.S. weapons tests.

Intelligence sources acknowledged that the Pentagon also has trained ground-based lasers on Soviet spacecraft, sometimes in attempts to disrupt their sensors. U.S. laser firings have not been designed to cause permanent damage, the sources said.

Attempting to counter the mounting Soviet space threat, the United States recently installed laser warning receivers on its newest generation of low-orbit spacecraft, intelligence sources said. The receivers can allow time for evasion action and assist ground controllers seeking to prove the Soviets inflicted the damage, the analysts said.

One analyst said that experts disagree as to whether the U.S. satellite malfunctions are due to Soviet attacks, noting that some skeptics in the intelligence community put the blame on 'natural causes.'

'Proof of what has happened to something in space is awfully hard to come by,' the analyst said.

But Angelo Codevilla, former Senate Intelligence Committee chief of staff, said he believes that the Soviets 'regularly pulse,' or target lasers on, U.S. satellites. Codevilla, now a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institute, a California-based think tank, acknowledged that 'there is no hard proof' of Soviet attacks.



Asked about the allegations of Soviet laser attacks, an Air Force spokesman declined comment on grounds all such information is classified.

But a knowledgeable Air Force source told UPI the government has decided to keep evidence of the laser attacks hushed 'for a variety of reasons.'

The official said the disclosure 'makes U.S. equipment look bad, but more important, the U.S. wanted to use the collected evidence of violations as a bargaining chip at the next round of Strategic Arms Limitation (START) talks.'

U.S. negotiators have made the argument, 'Look, we know this is going on and we are willing to make it public if you don't give this or that concession,' the official said.

Many U.S. analysts have warned that the warning receivers recently installed are only a start toward assuring the 'survivability' of the fleet of U.S. surveillance satellites, worth billions of dollars. The spacecraft are reported to be equipped with cameras and sensors so sophisticated they can detect a disguised, heated underground silo, distinguish live vegetation from camouflage, and relay a visual image of a tank column moving in the night.

The satellites perform 'vital military tasks' including coverage of world trouble spots and monitoring of Soviet military weapons development such as test launches of ballistic missiles and space vehicles, administration officials said.



The laser exchanges are not unlike those foreseen under President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative -- known as 'Star Wars' -- an elaborate space-based plan to defend against a Soviet missile attack.

One State Department analyst speculated that 'the whole Star Wars business probably started because the Soviets were messing around with our satellites.'

Several U.S. intelligence specialists said that they believe that some of America's most sophisticated spy satellites, the KH-11 photo reconnaissance models, have malfunctioned after being 'painted,' or focused on, by Soviet ground-based lasers.

According to several U.S. intelligence and aerospace industry sources, a KH-11 or Code 1010 satellite, sustained permanent damage in 1978 when it was 'hosed' by a Soviet laser. These sources believe that such incidents have continued up to the present.

According to laser specialists, the U.S. satellites apparently were blinded as they sought to observe Soviet launches from the space center at Tyuratam of test nuclear missiles and suspected 'killer satellites,' which would be activated only during a war.

The Soviets launch the killer satellites on a modified ballistic missile. Air Force officials said that in Soviet tests conducted in the late 1970s, a killer satellite used radar to target Soviet space vehicles on its second orbit and destroyed five out of seven.

The officials said the United States has no comparable technology, and the Soviet lasers apparently have hampered U.S. satellites from monitoring payloads, throw weights and other launch data.

Although U.S. air defense radar is capable of tracking the smallest objects orbiting Earth, if a satellite is inactive, or 'dark,' the Pentagon does not become aware of its mission until it becomes activated, intelligence experts report.

'By then, it's too late,' said John Pike, a satellite specialist for the Washington-based American Federation of Scientists. Pike said the Soviets commonly launch satellites three at a time, with only two immediately activated.

'The third just sits there and you wonder if it's a spare,' Pike said. 'You wouldn't know until the balloon goes up.'

According to U.S. intelligence sources, killer satellites are more effective if their mission in space can be concealed from the United States until wartime. Such 'dark satellites' are highly unlikely to be identified as a threat, U.S. analysts said.

An Air Force official told UPI the 'safest and surest way' to determine a satellite's position 'is from the mathematics provided by seeing the launch' which is why the United States tried to use low orbit satellites to monitor liftoffs.

The Soviets are suspected to have thwarted U.S. surveillance efforts by blinding the spacecraft, which were positioned over the Indian Ocean, he said.

But another U.S. intelligence source claimed the Soviets used lasers not merely in attempts to disrupt sensors but 'apparently to destroy (U.S.) equipment.'

The Soviets have had, for some years, a 'battle-ready' ground-based laser at Saryshagan that may have been involved in past incidents, U.S. intelligence sources said.

But U.S. concern centers on a laser being built at Nurek in Tadzhikistan and a second 500 miles away at Khazakstan in the Caucasus mountains in the southernmost part of the Soviet Union. Analysts concluded the new lasers are either part of an ABM defense network or ground-based laser battle system, they said.

Additional laser battle stations are being built on mountains near Dushanbe and another between Nurek and Dushanbe. Two other sites are planned, sources said.

Although official U.S. policy is not to interfere with Soviet satellites, U.S. officials acknowledged the United States had done 'mild hosings' of Soviet satellites trying to observe the launch of U.S. missiles involved in a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) program at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. U.S. laser scientists targeted the Soviet satellites with beams from ground-based facilities in Maui and Oahu, Hawaii and San Juan Capistrano, Calif., sources said.

They said the Maui facility 'is not a weapon' and that the laser is generally used 'for range-finding purposes.'

An aerospace industry source said, 'The illuminations were designed only to upset infrared sensors.'

But U.S. intelligence officials confirmed the Capistrano facility, which has since moved to Cloudcroft, N.M., possessed 'a full anti-satellite capability.'

Because lasers are difficult to aim and can be distorted by the atmosphere, U.S. officials have said a more effective tactic for foiling Soviet sensors has been to jam satellite radio communications to ground stations.

'We do a lot of jamming in real time' -- through instantaneous computerized interferences, said one U.S. intelligence source. Another explained that 'If you interrupt the signal being sent by the satellite, you have blinded it more effectively than using a laser.'

The Soviets are believed to have begun 'hosing' or illuminating the optical sensors of U.S. intelligence satellites in the 1970s. In 1975 an early warning satellite was blinded by what some U.S. analysts thought was a Soviet ground-based laser. Most experts later concluded that it was the flash from a gas pipeline fire in the Soviet Union that caused the blinding.

But a U.S. intelligence source said last week he still believes a laser was the cause of the malfunction.

Capt. G.R. Villar, former director of British naval intelligence, wrote in 1979 that on five occasions the Soviets 'illuminated United States satellites for periods of up to four hours with power of up to 1,000 times that seen in a forest fire or an ICBM launching.'

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